

Volunteer Learns to Care for Aunt and Countless Others

BY JOSEPH SHURE



Andrew McCray

Volunteer Advocate at
Meadowview Nursing
and Respiratory Center
in Williamstown

Andrew McCray may not have expected to be spending several hours a week in a nursing home unless he was living in one.

But when his aunt moved to a long-term care facility in Lawrence Township, he became her legal guardian. Andrew wanted to make sure his aunt was comfortable and getting quality care.

This is part of the reason why Andrew began volunteering at nursing homes. He eventually joined the Volunteer Advocate Program, overseen by the Department of the Public Advocate's Ombudsman for the Institutionalized Elderly, which investigates reports of abuse and neglect of people age 60 and older living in nursing homes and other long-term care facilities.

Acting as the eyes and ears of the Ombudsman's office, volunteers spend several hours a week visiting long-term care facilities, making sure residents receive the best possible care. Since the program's inception in 1993, volunteers have donated more than 50,000 hours to advocating on behalf of the state's institutionalized elderly.

Volunteering has paid off for Andrew. He learned how to check for signs that could signal inadequate care of elderly people living in nursing homes. That helped him ensure his aunt received the best possible care.

But a lot of other people benefited from Andrew's efforts, too. While he lost his aunt four years ago, Andrew has been volunteering at the Meadowview Nursing and Respiratory Center in Williamstown for two years. Before that, he volunteered at the Veterans' Memorial Home in Menlo Park for 10 years.

The duties of the former employee of the Department of Health and Senior Services include identifying minor issues that could make residents' lives less than pleasant.

He looks into bedrooms to see whether residents appear distressed or comfortable. He smells for lingering odors. He makes sure people have fresh water to drink and he greets as many people as possible,



Thomas Frost
Resident of
Meadowview Nursing
and Respiratory Center

making certain to speak to residents who do not usually receive visitors.

Many of the ways in which volunteer advocates help residents may seem insignificant to those who live independently.

But to someone who is unable to move without the help of a wheelchair and who can't get a drink of water for himself, having an advocate on hand is an indispensable help.

Regular visits from volunteers mean there is one more person who can help make residents a little more comfortable.

Andrew also deals with issues that pose a clear threat to residents' safety. He sees to it that their requests for staff attention are heeded in a timely manner. He makes sure pathways to emergency exits are clear.

In-fact, since he's begun volunteering, the facility has posted signs warning staff against placing large objects in the way of exits.

When he passes residents' rooms, he makes sure they can reach their call buttons. In one woman's room, he noticed the control was on the floor, out of her reach. He returned it to her bed. "I'm glad you came in to check," she told him.

Resident Richard Giannone said he is glad to have Andrew on his side. "Everything I've asked him to do so far, he's done it and he's done a good job," Richard said.

At one point, Richard's breathing problems made it difficult for him to operate the mechanical wheelchair he used. He wanted to be fitted for an electric one. The problem, he said, was the state wouldn't cover the cost.

He aired this problem to Andrew, who pledged to work with the staff to see about getting Richard the chair he wanted. The solution turned out to be seeing different doctor. The new one "took one look at me and said, 'You need an electric wheelchair,'" Richard said.

Another resident with whom Andrew has developed a rapport is

“Everything I’ve asked him to do so far, he’s done it and he’s done a good job.”

—Richard Giannone
Resident of Meadowview
Nursing and Respiratory
Center

Steven Ziglar, a 48-year-old from Millville, who uses an electric wheelchair and whose movement is severely restricted.

Steven said he is in the process of finding out how he can secure the assistance he would need to live independently. Andrew hopes to help him find a way to live on his own.

Andrew was quick to point out that his role is as a member of a team that included the facility staff.

Andrew says he began volunteering partly for a selfish reason — making sure his aunt got the best care possible from the facility at which she lived.

In the process, he has helped countless others who may not have had anyone else to turn to for help.



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